KING'S COMBE.

A STORY IN FOUR CHAPTERS. CHAPTER I.

After having escaped, for more than half a century, the universal scribbling mania, I fall a victim to it at the age of sixty-five—old enough to know better, most people would say.

I hear all around me, from men and women, young and old, people with brains and people without, much talk of the degeneracy of the age; what fine fellows we were in our grandfathers' time; how even our earlier ancestors would have looked with scorn upon such a dwindled, feeble, over-civilised set as we have become. At such a time the experience of a man whose leading idea this was, may be of general interest: it is this thought that impels me to make my first attempt at authorship.

My friend was not one of those men who let an idea cling to their heels all their lives, or smoulder in their brains at great risk to themselves and annoyance to their friends; he was a man of action; a man of brains and muscle; a powerful-armed, clear-headed, strong-willed Englishman.

He was born at King's Combe, the old home of his family; his mother died when he was seven years old, after entreating his father to watch over and train their boy carefully. This the squire in all sincerity swore to do.

So, within a month he put the urchin, who was already the terror of the servants, on a skittish pony, and told him to stick on. The boy clung sturdily to his steed for two fields, when the artful little beast, by an unexpected swerve, succeeded in throwing him; upon this, the squire picked up his son and heir, and gave him a whipping, took him home and sent him to bed. The next day the boy demanded to be set on the pony again, and asked for a whip; the animal ran away with him, after trying

everything in his power to dislodge the little creature who stuck like a limpet to his back. Not a bit daunted, young Combe, finding that he could not stop him, beat him with might and main; and even when, tired out, the pony would fain have trotted on quietly, his plucky little rider, with clenched teeth and puckered brow, whipped him and kicked him until the animal knew he was mastered; indeed the child administered the punishment with such good will, that the squire himself took him off—to spare the pony.

After this, when Squire Combe found that his son took his fences without the encouragement of a horse-whipping, he relaxed his vigilance; and as the boy's obstinate temper and indomitable pluck developed, and he mastered every horse, hound, and hedge in the county, his father was thoroughly satisfied with his fulfilment of his promise.

But one day, when young Combe was twelve years old, it suddenly turned out that he could not read. Shocked at this flaw in his system, the squire instantly sent him off to the old rector for a lesson in spelling; and engaged the reverend man to furnish his son with as much general knowledge as could be crammed into him in two hours a day, whenever there was no meet of fox-hounds, or other necessary interruption to his studies. So his education continued until he was nearly twenty, when he all at once demanded to be sent to college. His father, never very open-handed, demurred at the expense, and told him that he was better educated than any Combe had been before him. But Percy had made up his mind. So a tutor was engaged to prepare the young man as quickly as he might, spurred on by the bullying of father and son.

Young Combe was no fool, and, his will once exerted, he conquered Greek and Latin as he had done hedges and ditches. But once at Oxford, he went back to his old love, and it was there I met him, at the head of the wildest, boldest set in the university. I was a good shot in those days, but Combe beat me hollow; he was a very fair oarsman, and at riding, driving, leaping, and walking, not a man could come near him.

"Scoffing Combe" and "Cruel Combe" he was called, for he had neither reverence nor mercy.

He was twice rusticated for acts of wild audacity; ran into debt pretty deeply, and while waiting for the result of a bold avowal of his difficulties, which he had written to his father, he received the news that the squire was dead. So, at the age of twenty-four, Percy Combe found himself the possessor of nearly half Lubishire, and of more ready money than he or anyone else had given the old squire credit for possessing.

With a fixed idea of the degeneracy and effeminacy of the human race, the young squire did not occupy himself in devising plans for the reformation of the whole, but began setting to rights that portion of it which was under his immediate care.

He had ridden and hunted over the county until he knew every corner of it, and the state of every field; to the horror of the old Tory tenants, this professed ultra-Conservative began a severe weeding of the farmers—a regular Radical uprooting of some of the "oldest inhabitants."

"Do they think I'll spare them because they have spoiled the land longer than their neighbours? No, turn the dogs out, to make room for better men."

So they went; and better men—or better farmers—took their places. To men who "knew clay from sand," as the new squire said, the land was let on easy terms; only—they must spare the foxes.

There was a pack of hounds kept at King's Combe once more; the late squire had given it up on account of the expense; and my friend began to look out for a wife.

Combe was the richest and the handsomest man in the county, and the stories of his cruelty did not deter the Lubishire maidens from smiling their sweetest smiles, and showing off their prettiest airs and graces, in the hope of captivating him. But Combe stood fire like a veteran; he was no more afraid of an army of coquettes than of a swarm of gnats; he ran the gauntlet of all the brightest eyes within fifty miles, until he found what he wanted—a handsome, high-bred, high-spirited woman, with fortune and a pedigree; a will of her own, too, they said; but the squire had expected that.

"I've broken in a few thoroughbreds," said he.

And there is no reason to think that his boast was premature. They had six children, and then Margaret Combe died. People said he killed her, but Combe was not a favourite with the rustics.

The eldest child, a girl now ten years old, he sent away to school, saying, "Margaret was hard enough to stand a little

polishing." His five boys he kept with him, that he might train them himself "to be men, and none of your modern milk-sops!"

I paid my first visit to King's Combe when the eldest, Rutherford, was fifteen; and a bolder, harder set of wild young rascals I never met. The squire had to offer an immense salary to induce any tutor of ability, such as he wanted, to trust himself in the midst of such a crew; and the learned man who had been bold enough to accept the post would have been all but devoured, but for the protection vouchsafed him by the eldest son.

Rutherford was like his father, big, fair, and strong, with a steady, sullen courage that bore down all before him. He would take his brothers, and pitch them quietly out of window if they annoyed him; so the younger Combes felt for him a deep respect.

Concerning these little rascals, my chief care was to keep out of their way. They were neither brainless nor effeminate certainly; but, though not over-particular, I felt doubts as to the result of the squire's training.

"A little rough just now," said he to me; "but wait and see, they will be fine men."

When I next went to King's Combe it was late in the hunting-season, five years afterwards.

The three elder boys were at Harrow; and Dick and Bertie, having no one else to distract their attention, fought with each other, and left the rest of the household in comparative peace. These rough boys disgusted me, and we regarded each other with silent animosity.

One night, however, at about two o'clock, I was suddenly awakened by a noise in my dressing-room, which had no outlet except through my room; the window looked over the stable-yard, and one of the out-buildings was close under it. I listened: without doubt there was someone getting in by the window. I rose quietly, and taking my revolver, which always lay by my bedside, peeped through the chink of the door. Yes, there was the thief, just bringing his last leg over the window-sill. I threw open the door, and, pointing my revolver, shouted "Who's there?"

"Stop, you old fool!" was the courteous reply.

It could be no other than one of my host's sons. So I put down my weapon, and, striking a match, discovered Dick Combe, in impromptu attire, with a contemptuous grin on his face.

"What are you doing in my room, sir, at this time of night? Isn't one safe from your tricks even in bed?"

"Why didn't you stop there then? You might have known it was only one of our larks. But, I say, major, how about your sleeping with one eye open now? I'll swear they were both shut when I passed through your room!" said the boy, his eyes gleaming with mischief.

"Passed through my room, you young rascal!"

"Why, yes; to get out. You don't suppose I've been passing the night in the stable-yard?"

"Then, what the——"

"Oh fie, major! There, don't kick up a row. My room's over yours, you know; I heard your horse kicking and whining, so I thought I'd go and see if the brute was comfortable; and I came down the shortest way, you see. One eye open! Oh Lord! Which one was it, major?" and, with a diabolical laugh, Dick wrenched himself from my grasp, blew out my candle, and fled.

My visitor departed, I could only stifle a rising anathema, and stumble pensively back to bed. This was a kind act; the first I had ever heard of among the cruel Combes; for it was to relieve, not his own horse, but mine, that Dick had turned out of bed. Thinking of them, for the first time, not as young savages to be carefully avoided, it did strike me that the squire's system was rather an awful kind of training, which, in its process of strengthening, repressed all gentler feelings so carefully. What would be the result of turning five strong, hard, utterly selfish young giants loose upon the world? For the first time I gave a little of my pity to the giants.

The next day I listened with more interest than usual to the squire's talk about his sons.

"They will be ready for harness soon, now; Rutherford too, major; I'll have none of them loafing. I'll give them each one start—it is enough for a thoroughbred—set them all off in their race with time, the world, or whatever you call it; and then—devil take the hindermost!"

"But won't you give them a canter first, Combe? They are so young."

"Young! ay, and sound; and it is such should do the work of the world. No good comes of letting young fellows idle

away half-a-dozen years or so looking about 'em; running into debt; coming down to the old home once in a way for a few spare hundreds or a day with the hounds; picking up a little French philosophy and a little English blackguardism, and calling it knowledge of the world! No, that only comes by fighting it; and my boys, major, my boys have pluck and sinew; they will make a good fight, and—they'll win!"

There was the force of a brave heart and an iron will in the squire's words.

Time went on, and each, at the age of twenty-one, got his start. Rutherford chose to be a merchant, and throve; the others, although the squire allowed them their choice, followed the suggestions he gave them. He got a place in the Tintacks Office for Percy, the third. People told him he was throwing his clever son away; but the squire only said:

"Percy will get on wherever he may be."

It was respectfully hinted that a place of this kind would have been better for James, the second son, than the City, for which he was destined (James was a passive, surly giant, of the fairy-tale type); whereat the squire grew stolid.

"There's no taint of genius, your modern genius, in the Combe blood. You don't suppose I want Jim to develop a talent for prospectus-making, and to outcheat the shoddyocracy itself! But the boy, lout as he looks, will make his way. Never mind the brains; he's got the stuff of a man in him, see if that won't pull him through."

And it did; Jim got on, to the surprise of students of physiognomy, and at five-and-twenty was accounted a rising man.

"As for Dick, he hasn't brains enough for anything but the army, major," said the squire to me. And into the army Dick went. Cuthbert was not yet provided for. It was nearly two years after Dick's start when I met the squire in town one glorious autumn morning.

"What! you here, squire? And at this time of the year?"

"Yes, come up to have a crow over the chimney-pots, and to see how yellow you are all looking. Hang me if I've seen a decent-looking face except my own since I've been in London! and your villainous soot and smoke so begrime the looking-glass, that it was all I could do to recognise that. As for you, you're as bent as a witch and as withered as a piece of parchment; but then, poor fellow, what can you expect in this hole? Come down to us for the hunting; I'm going to give all my boys a gallop, and we shall have a capital season. Come and see them. I told you they would open the oyster, major—beg your pardon, colonel—and, by Jove, so they have. Come you must!"

I was very glad to accept the invitation, and, at the beginning of the season, two days before a breakfast and meet at King's Combe, I got down there late in the afternoon, just five years ago.

At the door of the station stood a dog-cart, with a powerful bay mare rearing and plunging, a groom trying to hold her head, and a handsome boy of nineteen or so, unknown to me by face, but swearing in the well-known Combe style, holding the reins.

"Ah, colonel, how d'ye do? Haven't got a hand to spare with this brute, but I'll have her steady in a minute."

But an old cavalry officer knows how to cut a knot of this kind; I put my hand on the rail of the cart, and was up in a minute by the side of this off-hand charioteer. He gave me an approving nod.

"All right, William!"

And off we went at a good pace. When the mare had at last steadied a bit at the foot of a steep hill, my companion favoured me with a few comments on the scenery, which is as pretty round King's Combe as anywhere in England.

"That's the five-bar where Tom Seymour broke his leg last summer. There's the haha that always weeds the field, colonel. Best covert in Lubishire that to the right. Good hunting country—plenty of stiffish fences, and an awkward brook or two. That over yonder, two fields beyond the turnips, is the jump of the country," said he, pointing to a leap which even at this distance looked impracticable. A wide brook at the end of a clayey field, then a bank surrounded by a tall, close hedge; and, as my guide informed me, a deep drop on to loose soil on the other side.

"There are only two men I know who can take that without making their wills," said young Combe, coolly; "the squire, and Rutherford the rider (that's Rutherford, nicknamed so by us when we were little chaps), can do it on Lady Betty, and even the squire doesn't take it now except when he is in very good form. As for the

rest of us, we know better than to try! But I forgot, colonel; you know all about the country; you were here before I was put into knickerbockers."

I assured him that what he said was new to me, and he rattled on discursively until we reached the lodge, where the gate was opened like magic by a frightened little girl, and we dashed through the long avenue up to the door.

The squire and Miss Margaret had not yet returned, the butler said, so I was taken up to my room, the same that I had had before.

I did not know whether the redoubtable Dick still occupied the room overhead, but there was someone there in boots and a passion; a couple of dogs were barking and yelping in the yard below, to the accompaniment of a deep voice, as of an idle man amusing himself at their expense; and my friend of the dog-cart was cracking hunting-whips in the hall, and whistling like Boreas. The taint of effeminacy, so dreaded by the squire, was evidently as far from King's Combe as ever.

The cracking ceased, and the thundering overhead was succeeded by a heavy tread down the stairs, before I left my room and made for the drawing-room.

The prospect of an hour or so in the society of five young men of different degrees of sulkiness, and a strong mutual combativeness, did not please me; from old association I felt very much as if about to enter a den of lions. As I went downstairs I saw standing in front of the huge fire in the hall a gentleman, young and well-dressed; the sight was very welcome, for he was not tall enough for a Combe, though erect and well-built; and his hair was dark, while they were fair. As I reached the last stair he turned and—he was Combe to the core! He came forward with the air of a well-behaved prince, and said, bowing: "Sir George, I am afraid you do not recognise one of your old tormentors; I am Percy Combe."

I had scarcely time to wonder how the rough, pert boy had been transformed into the courteous, well-bred man, for he led me at once to the drawing-room, and I stood once more in the presence of all the "cruel Combes." The change had not been so great in all of these. The handsome, sullen-looking giant who bore down upon me first was unmistakably "the rider," with an imposing look of passive strength in face and form. I never liked Rutherford; his face wanted animation to carry off the cruel expression.

But could the indolent exquisite, well-built enough to practise the fashionable lounge without looking as if he were falling to pieces, with hair parted in the middle, and a dainty camellia in his button-hole, be "sulky Jim?" How could the squire put up with it? But a dandy of six feet two, broad in proportion, commands respect; Squire Combe probably knew that the diamond ring would in no wise cripple his son's hand if his own rights were infringed.

"Awfully cold you must have found it, driving," said he. And then my old friend "Dare-devil Dick" came forward. He was the one in whom I took the most interest, and I shook hands with him heartily. He was a good-looking young fellow of two or three and twenty, tall, slight and fair, with gray eyes; there was an honesty in his face still that attracted me; but instead of the bright, straightforward look of old days, he wore a shamefaced expression which I did not like to see. He seemed to be in the famous "Combe sulks." He edged out of the group, and my charioteer was formally introduced to me as Cuthbert, whom I had not much noticed during my last visit, but whom I remembered, at the age of six, getting under the table to operate upon my boots with a pair of champagne-tweezers.

"I can't think what is keeping my father, Sir George," said Rutherford; "he will be much annoyed that he was not here to receive you."

And then began a discussion of hunting prospects, in which all took part except Dick, who threw in an occasional interjection from a corner of the room, where he was reading, with the air of one to whom this was an unaccustomed and tedious occupation.

My favourite Dick was the only one in whom the old surliness remained unchanged. Was the squire's plan the right one, after all, for turning out model English gentlemen? and how was it that Dick was the only exception? A follower of my profession too; I wanted to draw him into conversation.

"Well, Dick, and how do you like the army?"

He looked up, as black as thunder.

"Jolly, by Jove!" was his laconic answer.

Rutherford dropped his newspaper, and Percy asked me if I had seen that article in the "Saturday," on "Serene Simpletons," evidently to turn the conversation. Then he led me into the next room to see a new picture of a favourite horse.

"The squire had it taken last spring," said he; "the old horse has carried him well, and will carry him yet; by-the-bye, you won't find him in quite such good spirits as usual, I am afraid, Sir George. The fact is, he has had a disappointment. Dick has made a mess of it; got into debt, and will have to sell out. The squire is not used to having his plans upset, you know; and his favourite plan is that his boys shall succeed in life. It was a mistake to put Dick into the army; a soldier wants backbone as much as anybody, as you know, colonel."

Poor Dick! No wonder he was surly. It was not a pleasant thing to be the first failure of a man like the squire. I was silent for a minute, and then we heard the crunching of wheels on the gravel; the squire had returned.

Percy had been romancing a little, in order to bring in the subject of Dick's delinquencies neatly; Squire Combe was just the same as ever, but at dinner he did not speak to Dick. Margaret Combe was a handsome, well-bred, fair woman, not far short of thirty; more strikingly like her father than any of them. Her long white hand could control a horse almost as well as any of her brothers; but there was not a trace of the "fast young lady" about Margaret. Yet I did not wonder that she had never married when I saw the cold way in which she followed the squire's lead by ignoring unlucky Dick. I had felt great surprise, and even a kind of disappointment, at my five typical vagabonds having turned out so like other people. I had judged too soon. As the dinner went on, and the first slight restraint of my presence wore away, the old influence of their home began to work; and by the time Margaret left the room the Combe stamp was visible enough. Dick, who had been eating his dinner crestfallen and almost in silence, gave signs of returning animation by muttered comments on his eldest brother's remarks; and at last, when Rutherford made a statement about the condition of the fields, he flatly contradicted him. His father turned his head sharply, and spoke to the scapegrace for the first time.

"Dick, hold your tongue."

The squire was absolute still. Dick was quiet, but I heard him swear under his moustache.

Presently the squire asked me to come and have a cigar in his study; and there, with each an arm-chair by the big, comfortable fire, we began to talk about "the boys;" the squire, in his brave old Roman way, adverting at once to Dick, the failure.

"It was too much to suppose that the old proverb would not hold good about the one black sheep in every flock," said he. "I believe I might have known it was Dick who was the fool. Percy has got it into his head that the army did for him, but one road to the devil is as short as another for a lad who wishes to go that way. Dick had his warning like the others."

The squire disposed of his son's destiny in his usual firm, clear tones. I was shocked, and heartily sorry for the poor lad—the old story of the world's sympathy with a ne'er-do-weel.

"But, squire, he is so young. He'll do yet. He has got the Combe pluck as much as any of them; there is not a bolder rider, a more fearless fellow in England than 'Dare-devil Dick.'"

The squire looked at me with his blue eyes keen and animated.

"Bold! Aye, he'd not be a Combe if he couldn't ride. But, colonel, do you think I wanted my boys to do nothing better than smash through a hedge or manage a thoroughbred? Dick would have made an excellent whip; but unfortunately he's a Combe and a gentleman. For me to own him my son, a lad must be neither fool nor craven. A man with ordinary brains—and Dick has brains—is a fool to race and bet, and risk three times the money he has to lose. Dick's a fool; so he may go his own way, and be hanged to him!"

This was more than I could stand.

"Squire, you're wrong. Dick is no old man before his time; but he has an honest look in his face which would become some of his brothers. I believe he is worth all the rest of them put together."

But the squire only answered good-humouredly:

"Ah, George, you always had a weakness for open country." Then he changed the subject. "But there is one thing troubles

me about my boys—they don't marry. It is not as if they would have any trouble about it; there's the very girl to hand—Lord Dereham's daughter. You know him—Dereham Hall? Heiress, good hunting country; fine, handsome girl, rides to hounds, takes her fences with the best of them. Well, they won't have a word to say to her. Not that I mind for Rutherford; he is shrewd, and will do well in marriage, as in everything else. But there's Dick. It would have been the saving of Dick; but he flung away that chance like the rest. Then there's Jim. A clever woman like that would have towed him through the world without any trouble, supplying brains and everything; just what would have suited him. But no, though he would give her a lead, mangle a joke for her amusement, swear at her groom for her—if she needed that; now he must needs neglect her for a little insignificant chit without nerve or money—our new parson's daughter—reads Tennyson and screams at sight of a spider. I forbade him to think of her at first, but now I suppose I must put up with it to settle him. As for Percy, I think he looks still higher than Lady Ethel. The beggar's clever—how he came by it the Lord knows! When they were all running wild here together it was Percy who had to make peace with irate farmers, or persuade a bumpkin whom they had knocked down that he felt rather the better for it than otherwise. Whipper-snapper as he was among four bullying boys, with fists like sledge-hammers, he never came to grief. He's not a thorough Combe—Percy has wires instead of sinews. I put him in the Tintacks because I thought he would have nothing to do there. When I was young, people said and believed that 'Satan found some mischief still for idle hands to do;' but now the rogues are the busy bees. And the City might have sharpened his faculties, as it has done those of many another indifferent honest fellow. But Percy won't rust in the Tintacks. I shouldn't be surprised if he were leader-writer to some Radical paper."

The shrewd old squire was not far wrong. I went upstairs, admiring the clear-headedness and penetration of my vigorous friend. But, as it turned out, there were some things which escaped even the lynx-eyes of Squire Combe.

KING'S COMBE.

A STORY IN FOUR CHAPTERS. CHAPTER II.

THE next morning at breakfast, Jim—the Dandy, as his brothers called him—publicly announced his intention of going to church. I sat next to Percy and murmured, "The little parsoness."

"Keep your eyes open," returned "Clever Combe," oracularly, also under his breath.

I did open them when Rutherford, adding indolently that there was nothing better to do, said that he thought he should go; and Dick said briefly, "So shall I;" and Cuthbert followed suit with a discontented, "Then I suppose I'm booked!"

Of course gentlemanly Percy was going.

I came down for church in good time, but no one was yet ready. Nobody had a prayer-book except Percy, who was dutifully waiting to escort his sister; the servants were running about for books, followed by the expectant worshippers with imprecations; so I started by myself, unnoticed in the general excitement.

The church was not far off; genuinely Norman, with heavy pillars and small windows—a sturdy little building almost hidden by trees. I was very early. Inside the church stood an old man, pulling a couple of knotted ropes, and leaving off from time to time to wipe his face with his handkerchief; and a double row of children in the agonies of catechism. Facing them sat the little parsoness.

She took me by surprise, for she was well-dressed, well-bred, and a beauty. A little brown beauty, quite free from the conventional brunette vivacity—she looked up with a pair of sweet dark eyes, as she drew a couple of heavy little rustics out of my way. I walked meditatively on to the big square Combe pew. What a charming little creature! and what a pity that she should throw herself away upon that great hulking Combe!

I was pleased, as much for his own sake as for his pretty daughter's, to recognise in the rector, as he walked up the aisle, an old college-chum, John Irwin.

I thought he stared from his desk when he saw the whole Combe family file in, but the vigorous nudging and nodding of the yokels was still more expressive.

Dick sat next to me, and Rutherford nearest to the door; and when, as we were all standing up, the little parsoness came softly in and stole into her father's pew in the next aisle, she carried their two pairs of eyes with her, and kept them, with but short intervals, during the whole service.

The Dandy, poor fellow, was seated opposite to me, whence he could not get a glimpse of her without ricking his neck. He turned round devoutly when we stood up, and when the sermon began and that consolation was denied him, he folded his arms and went to sleep, while his sister decorously roused him from time to time with a brass-bound church service.

While we were waiting in the churchyard after service, according to country custom, I hoping for a chance of renewing acquaintance with my old friend, his daughter came out. Rutherford and Dick contented themselves with raising their hats, but James went up and spoke to her. Percy came to me, looking much amused.

"Let me show you a short cut home, Sir George."

"Thank you, I am waiting to shake hands with your pastor, in whom I have recognised an old friend."

"You had better come with me, Sir George; he won't be out for another half-hour. The fact is, Mr. Irwin is a martyr to his principles; he insists that all the rheumatic and infirm brethren, who can't escape him, you know, in his pastoral calls, shall put in an appearance at church on Sunday; so they take it out in religious consolation in the church porch, while his roast mutton is spoiling. A hunting country is fatal to rustic simplicity—the sheep get foxy!"

I took his advice, and walked on with him.

"What do you think of our rural beauty, Sir George? Very picturesquely devout, isn't she?"

I did not much like this cynical tone upon such a subject.

"She is very pretty," I replied, briefly.

"Yes, she is pretty enough to turn the heads of the whole lot of those silly Combes. In fact, she has done great execution already; Rutherford and Dick will settle the Dandy between them, I expect, big as he is."

"The squire seems to have no idea how much mischief 'the little chit' has done?"

"No; isn't it wonderful, what the Lubishire air and friction with Lubishire wits can do for even the squire? He would never suspect Rutherford of such folly; and as for Dick, if the squire gave it a thought, he would say that, being a soldier, he felt bound to fall in love with every pretty face he saw."

"But they seem to let Jim have it all his own way."

"The fact is, colonel, I believe Dick and the Rider are both too hard hit to be noisy; but they can't go on much longer without clashing; they are at daggers drawn already."

"Has the lady no preference?"

"It is dangerous to answer for a lady's heart. Let us say she is making up her mind. Balance the chances: you see it is not exactly a case of Wealth versus Whiskers, for the Rider is not bad-looking; still, Dick has the pull personally, though he is not so tall; then he is a scapegrace, that is in his favour. His nickname, Dare-devil Dick, would do wonders with most women; not, perhaps, with Mary Irwin."

Percy's words implied a compliment, but there was a sneer lurking about his mouth.

"Then you think Rutherford will be the favoured one?"

"Well, since there is really a conversion involved in either case, the little parsoness may reason that it were better worth while to save the soul of the heir!"

"Your suggestions do credit to your ingenuity," said I, rather dryly. Percy's usual good-humoured cynicism seemed to me ill-natured bitterness now that it was applied to that pretty, gentle girl. But his tact was equal to the occasion.

"Indeed, Sir George, it was ill-judged of me to make such suggestions to so chivalrous an old soldier. Put down my ill-nature, if you like, to jealousy. I assure you I felt a great temptation to enter the lists myself at one time; but what could a little whipper-snapper like me hope to do against such an array of bone and muscle as my three big brothers present."

Percy's tone was by no means heart-broken, and I confess that, at the time, I gave little heed to his words.

In the afternoon, I went again to church, and, to my surprise, found Dick already seated in a corner of the pew. He followed

me out, but when I looked round for him at the church-door, he was gone. Determined not to miss my friend Irwin, I strolled about the churchyard, and came to an angle of the wall where an old mouldy tombstone, overhung by a crooked willow-tree, attracted my attention.

While idly stooping down to make out the indistinct inscription, I heard the light sound of a woman's dress a few yards from me, and saw through the branches my pretty Miss Irwin, evidently waiting for her father.

Dear little domestic queen! I could connect "tea getting cold" with the light annoyance in her face, and one pretty little hand impatiently tapped the stone by which she was standing. Her father was coming! For I heard a quick, firm step; he was hurrying, not to say bolting, round the corner to meet his—no, not his daughter, for the newcomer was—Dick Combe! Dick, with the sulkiness melted at last, and the gentlest of gruff voices.

"Mary, my darling!" and, lifting his hat, he bends down and kisses her, yes, kisses my "domestic queen," as reverently as if she were a saint in a window.

I am surprised, I admit it, and captured moreover, for I cannot get out of my corner without disturbing this idyll, or this plot. So I stand and wait.

Mary is gentle and self-possessed, and even now looks quite mistress of the situation.

"I have been waiting five minutes!"

"I could not help it, Mary darling; that confounded old lynx-eyes the squire's got at Combe now came pottering down to church this afternoon, and he's been prowling about ever since we came out. I dodged him round a tombstone, and left him making out an illegible epitaph with his walking-stick."

Did you, my pert young friend?

"Oh hush, Dick!" says my beauty, sweetly.

Dick receives the rebuke with serious submission, and kisses the hand he holds, humbly.

"I'll forgive him! I'd forgive anyone anything now, even the Rider for looking at you! But"—and Dick, with a sigh of remembrance, began to look gloomy again—"I want you to comfort me, my darling; I'm down on my luck, and no mistake, Mary—have to sell out, and the squire's dead against me. Don't think I've been going the pace all this time, Mary," said he, earnestly; "I've been as steady as old time since you said you'd have me; but the fact is I didn't know then how deep I was. You had better have taken Rutherford, or even Jim, than thrown yourself away on a poor devil like me," said Dick, becoming suddenly bitter, and turning away a few steps to be brought back and comforted.

"Oh, Dick, don't say such things," said Mary, laying the required hand on his big shoulder.

Dick looked at the little hand, and turned round at once, with the most honest of smiles beaming in his fair face.

"So you wear my ring!"

"Yes, always."

"My darling! But what do they say?"

"Oh, you know papa never notices anything, and I could easily satisfy him if he did ask who gave it to me."

Dick beamed.

"Mary, my little darling, whatever made you care for such an uncouth brute as I am!"

Then he broke out passionately:

"I can't give you up, Mary, I can't give you up, though I believe I ought. I'll work hard to win you, and, God help me, I'll deserve to take care of you some day! But do write to me, Mary; you know I'd write to you if you would let me; but can't you send me a line now and then? I don't leave them on the table, as you said I should, not even the envelopes. I've got the three little notes I've had from you by heart, long ago: 'My dear Dick, I hope you don't think——'"

Mary put up her hands, laughing softly.

"Oh, hush! You ought to have something better to do!"

Here Dick slid round the tombstone.

"Better to do than thinking of you, Mary; you don't mean that. But, oh yes, I've remembered what I've heard you say about a cultivated mind, and I've taken to reading because I thought you would like it—read Vanity Fair, stupid book, but there's a girl in it, Milly, just like you; that is why I finished it. And I've read Harry Lorrequer; that's jolly, and you are exactly like Lady Jane! And I read every word in that book of Tennyson's you gave me."

"You took, you mean!"

"Yes; but I don't think I care much for poetry; don't seem to understand it all exactly; but you said you liked criticising books with people—oh, and I like Mary Anne in the Mouldy Grange, because I thought it was like you, sometimes, perhaps, when I'm away."

And again he bent down, wistfully.

She only looked up, and answered, with her demure gentleness: "Yes, indeed, I often think of you when you are away!"

It was a very cool admission, certainly. Dick drew back, wounded; then he said, low and quickly: "Mary, do you care for me as much as you used to do? If you don't, why I—I—I don't mind, you know, but——"

He looked so miserable, so crestfallen, so disappointed, as he moved away, not looking up.

But she did not mean to try him too far. She let him march on until he was brought up short by another tombstone, and then she waded through the rank wet grass after him, put one hand on his shoulder, while she slid the other into his, and lisped out in sweet, tender tones:

"Dick, you know I do."

As he turned, she raised her head, her soft eyes shining with the smile of an enchantress. I could see Combe's lip quiver as he heard her—looked at her. Then his shyness was gone. Looking down on her with all his love and tenderness shining in his honest eyes, he locked her other hand in his and kissed her. Then he burst out, incoherently enough.

"My own, own darling, Heaven knows how I love you, what I would do for you! You are my angel—no, don't stop me, you are my true angel, the only good I have ever known, all the goodness and pureness and truth in the world to me, and God grant I may be worthy of you. I was nothing but a brute without you, and it is only your sweet pity that makes you care for me; but don't leave off, Mary; as long as you care for me I'll fight against the world for you, but if you give me up, I'm a lost man!"

The tones of his young voice were bitterly earnest.

Mary listened with tender eyes.

"Oh, Dick, you know I love you, truly and dearly; don't doubt me again, you dear, silly boy. But now you must let me go; papa will be out and coming to look for me. Good-bye, good-bye, dear Dick!"

"Good-bye, my own gentle darling."

Drawing herself away, Mary ran lightly off, and Dick marched slowly round the corner in the opposite direction.

Not a little interested in this unexpected romance, I slowly left my corner and sauntered round to the church-door. There, wearing perfectly the appearance of having been waiting half an hour, lounged the ingenuous Dick; but he was not so sulky as before.

"At last, Sir George; I hope you haven't been in mischief; I've been wondering where you'd gone!"

The flagrant hypocrisy of this simple youth shocked me very much; but as I had my own reasons for silence concerning the proceedings of the past ten minutes, I played the hypocrite too.

And then out came the rector. He recognised me at once, and insisted on my going home to tea with them.

"Come you must, we are simple people, and our six-o'clock Sunday tea won't take away your appetite for dinner at eight. Tell the squire I won't keep Sir George long, Richard," said he, turning to Dick, who looked as if he would have liked an invitation too.

Dick said "All right, Mr. Irwin," and marched off, while we took the path to the rectory.

"I won't have that good-for-nothing young fellow, or his swearing brothers, dangling about the house," said my friend, in the judicious-parent tone. "I don't wish to see my Mary married to one of those brutal Combes."

Now I had already enlisted on the other side, so I said:

"Well, Irwin, I think there's something sterling in Dick Combe; and that is saying more for him than it would be for another man, considering the way those boys were brought up."

"No good will ever come of that lad," replied the judicious parent, obstinately; "unless, indeed, it should by the special intervention of Providence," added he, recalling his professional view of the lost sheep.

I had no opportunity to say more, for he talked of other things until we reached the house.

I was introduced to the rector's daughter, who skilfully guided us away from those theological sandbanks, upon which the well-read rector loved to strand his friends.

Then the tea was brought in, and my lady gravely set to work with that subdued clatter which, when well managed, is a great charm of tea-making.

She had just brought me a cup, and the rector, with ominous placidity, was beginning with:

"I was reading yesterday a very curious speculation concerning——" when the door was opened by the maid, who announced:

"Mr. Rutherford Combe!"

The rector looked surprised and annoyed.

But Rutherford was not in the least discomposed by the coolness of his reception; he turned to the rector with stolid unconcern, and said:

"I have to apologise for intruding upon you, Mr. Irwin; but I came to tell Sir George that he need not hurry away, for the squire has gone over to Dereham and dinner will be half an hour later; I came myself that I might bring your overcoat, Sir George, as it will be cold by the time you return."

"I am very much obliged to you, but I never catch cold," replied I rather stiffly. I thought this rather officious of the thick-headed giant. I was not his grandfather, nor so infirm as he seemed to think.

Rutherford remained quite unmoved by my petulance, and turned to go; when Mary made the best amends in her power for us, and asked him to have a cup of tea; he accepted the invitation, and took a seat beside her.

My friend began again upon his discovery of the day before. He soon found that he must have that book to read me some passages. I glanced around for help, but my pretty ally of earlier in the evening was quite engrossed by that big Combe. A light dawned upon me. Perhaps Rutherford's officiousness need not have worried me; perhaps I was only a convenient instrument, whom he had been using as a means of tormenting my pretty little tea-maker. Irwin was by this time full fathom five in his "curious speculations," which he was reading aloud to me; so I took the opportunity of looking at Dick's beautiful lady-love and her stupid persecutor.

She was looking down and listening with sublime patience while the impertinent fellow talked to her in a low voice—surely she could not stand it much longer! No, for she presently looked up; but it was with the very same glance which had done so much execution that afternoon on poor Dick! The rector buzzed quietly on, but I gave him neither eyes nor ears; I watched and—yes, and listened, and wished intensely to punish my fair enchantress by pitching her admirer out of the window.

It was evident that her sweet eyes had again made great havoc; the Rider was looking down at her sullenly.

"Of course you laugh at us rustics, Miss Irwin!"

She looked up with the same provoking sweetness:

"Laugh at you? Oh no, indeed."

Cool Rutherford was losing his head; he growled out savagely:

"It's true you're infernally civil to Dick!"

Mary gave him a glance which was the most beautiful, gentle rebuke, and said with some dignity:

"I have known your brother Richard longer than I have you, Mr. Rutherford."

"And that's why you like him so much better?"

"I did not say that."

"Well say it then; do you?"

He blurted out these words, shortly and sharply, his cold blue eyes flashing with passion.

Mary was calm and gentle, as usual.

"Well—no!"

Poor Dick, poor Rutherford! What fools! What a little sorceress! The innocent rector looked up, beaming theology:

"So that's quite conclusive, isn't it?"

"Quite," snapped I, rising quickly, and looking at the clock.

"But, my dear Irwin, I've been so interested in—in that—what you've been reading, that we have been forgetting the time."

Rutherford rose, heavy and self-possessed as usual; but his face was still flushed, his eyes were still glittering.

"Mr. Irwin," said he leisurely, "I hope you will come up to King's Combe to-morrow."

"Well, I don't know," began the rector.

Rutherford continued, quietly, "Your friend Mr. Hedley will be there, and——"

"Will he?" interrupted Mr. Irwin. "A very intelligent man, Mr. Hedley; but then, I should not get a chance of a talk with him."

"Easiest thing in the world," replied Rutherford. "You persuade Miss Irwin to bring you up in the pony-carriage, and wait while you get out and have a chat. The meet will be the prettiest thing in the world, and would please your daughter immensely."

Rutherford knew that, intelligent as he was, nothing would induce his friend Hedley to enter into a learned discussion on a hunting morning.

I left the house with young Combe, followed to the gate by the rector, with a parting injunction to study the Reverend Giles Jones on Chinese Speculative Theology.

We walked home almost in silence. I

came down before him into the drawing-room, where the rest were waiting for the squire and dinner. Dick was still beaming; having been twice reproved by his sister for whistling, he was now occupying himself in the less secular amusement of jangling the lustres on the mantelpiece.

The squire returned home in high good-humour, and even threw a word or two to Dick. When Margaret had left the room after dinner, the squire filled his glass, and gazed at it for a few minutes, thoughtfully. Then he looked down to where Dick and Cuthbert were bawling a cheerful discussion across the table.

"Dick," said the squire; and everyone was silent, expectant.

"Dick, I am going to give you another chance."

Dick stared, radiant but puzzled.

"You can't expect to be particular after having thrown away one chance, you know," continued the squire, genially.

"Anything, anything, sir; I'll turn my hand to anything," stammered Dick, eagerly.

"Well, there's the difficulty," said the squire, with imperial jocoseness. "It has more to do with your head than with your hands, Dick!"

Everyone laughed; so did Dick himself, good-humouredly enough.

"You shall be a parson, Dick."

Dick looked up, startled. Everyone was surprised. Cuthbert chuckled, and drank a glass of wine hastily.

"A parson, sir?" said Dick.

"Yes. There's a living near Dereham, place called Dorbridge, worth eight hundred a year; the rector has been past work for years, and can't last much longer. Dereham has promised it to Dick. So don't thank me, boy, for it is all Lady Ethel's doing; it seems she is very High Church, and let me tell you, Dick, she has a fancy for curates."

Dick seemed to be in a maze.

"But, sir, I should never do for a parson; I couldn't preach a sermon to save my life."

"Gammon!" said the squire; "no son of mine but could string together a firstly, secondly, lastly, finally, and in conclusion, with any reverend ass in the country. We won't be particular about your theology; and whether you are High Church, Low Church, or Broad Church, you shall lead us by the nose, as far as our souls are concerned."

"Provided you don't give us more than twenty minutes," said Rutherford.

"And if you'll make it ten, I'll desert my own spiritual adviser in your favour," added Jim.

"Dick has strong lungs and a heavy fist; I should think he would make what is called a powerful preacher," said Percy's clear voice.

While this was going on, I saw Dick's colour change; he hesitated, cleared his throat, and then said hurriedly: "I'm not fit for a parson, squire!"

His father stared; the Dandy put up his eyeglass.

"Conscientious scruples, by Jove!" said Jim.

Then the squire spoke rather cynically: "You'll make a better parson than I thought for, Dick! I didn't think there was a spice of psalm-singing in the family; I suppose you took it in the army. However, I am not afraid that it is radical; so you shall have the run of my stable still, and I'll be bound you'll find time to follow the hounds twice a week at least."

The squire spoke as if the matter was settled; but I had been watching Dick's face, and I saw the Combe look rising there. When the squire had finished, he raised his head and said, steadily:

"It's no use, squire; I'm not fit for it, and—I won't!"

No one moved; insubordination to the squire was unknown; even Percy was shocked. The squire's tanned cheek flushed, his eyes grew brighter; he spoke sharply and firmly, but rather as if correcting a very disobedient child.

"Dick, don't be a fool. When I say a thing is to be done, it is done. You will go into training at once, and be up at Oxford within three months; make the best of your time, and come back and win Lady Ethel before the whim has gone out of her head!"

Dick's face had been growing more and more excited as the squire spoke; when he had finished, the young fellow started up, and pushed back his chair.

"D—— Lady Ethel," cried he, fiercely; "she must choose one of her own pet curates, brought up to the trade. I'll have nothing to do with her!"

We all sat thunderstruck; all but the squire, who had regained perfect self-command when his son lost it. He stood up, erect, firm, like a king.

"Richard, you have lost your head. No son of mine, in his senses, could otherwise have spoken so of a lady. When you are sober or sane again, decide either

to accept the proposal I have made you, or—to go to the deuce your own way. I give you till this time to-morrow to make up—your mind."

The squire put cutting emphasis upon the last words.

"You may go."

Dick remained standing, as if he had not heard. Percy rose, drew his arm through his, and led him out of the room. The squire then left us by another door. For the first few minutes the three remaining brothers seemed scarcely able to collect their thoughts for speech. Cuthbert spoke first:

"It's an infernal shame! Why should Dick, of all of us, be thrown away!"

"Shut up, Bertie," said Rutherford, decisively.

Jim had got back a little of his habitual languid manner.

"Papa is coarse in his way of putting it, but I believe he's right," drawled he.

"Of course he is, and Dick's an ass," replied Rutherford.

KING'S COMBE.

A STORY IN FOUR CHAPTERS. CHAPTER III.

THE next morning answered our expectations; Percy said the air "smelt foxes;" Rutherford said, "Hang the breakfast; we might have had a glorious run, instead of sitting down to a heavy feed!"

I could hear the voices of their two younger brothers in the stable-yard until after the guests had arrived. Cuthbert had always been a chum of Dick's, and, since Dick had been in the army, an admirer; he had become enthusiastic since his easy-going brother had defied the will that had been law to them all, and "stood up for his rights like a thorough-plucked 'un."

In this mood, Cuthbert found it wiser to keep out of the way of his muscular and less sympathetic elder brothers. However, they came in to breakfast, Dick holding his head up once more now that

the worst was over, and looking half-shy, half-resolute. He had an unexpected ordeal before him; for Dick was a favourite with the Lubishire hunting-men, and he was surrounded on his entrance by a group of country squires, who had not seen him since he had entered the army.

"Why, Dick, you look as fresh as if you had never left Lubishire!"

"How do, Dick; glad to see you back again; confound you, you've got as good a grip as your father!"

Dick's nervousness had probably increased the force of his hand-shaking.

"Like to see you in pink again, Dick!"

"Why, he wouldn't know himself out of a red coat now," said another, leading the laugh at his little joke.

"You ought to be proud of that lad, squire," said the swell of the neighbourhood, in a coat of divers colours, once scarlet; "he's the best-looking you've turned out yet!"

"Handsome is that handsome does, Sir Harry," returned the squire, briefly.

Dick did look handsome in his scarlet coat, and honest too; a slight, well-built fellow, with fair, flushed face, thick brown hair, and bright, steady-looking eyes; strong in youth and vigorous health as even the squire could desire, but encumbered with the unprovided-for attributes of a heart and a conscience. Poor Dick, what mischief these were working him!

The breakfast was long enough to try Rutherford's patience to the utmost; but at last the guests began to straggle out into the hall and then into the drive; looking for their grooms with their horses, and not finding them as soon as might have been expected. In the country every man-servant has a brother, sister, or at any rate a cousin, in everyone else's establishment; and there was generally, on these occasions, a large party of more or less smart grooms refreshing exhausted nature in the back-yard.

I went straight to the stable, mounted my horse, and cantered out on to the wide lawn in front of the house, where the rest of the field were gradually assembling. Parallel to this lawn, and separated from it only by a bed of rhododendrons and a wire fence, ran the drive which led from the green lodge to the house. Resolved to get out of the way of the farmers, and to wait quietly until all should be ready, I took my stand near a group of bare elms close to the fence, and saw in the drive, some few paces distant, the rector's pony-carriage, with Mary in it alone, the rector having pottered off in search of Mr. Hedley. She did not see me, for she was looking with great interest among the moving groups on the lawn; for whom? Was it for Dick, whom I now saw hurrying down the drive from the house, radiant and ruddy? She started when she heard his voice close to her; I thought she did not look pleased.

"Mary, my darling, you here! I can hardly believe my eyes!"

"Oh, how you frightened me! Yes, papa came up, hoping to see Mr. Hedley; your brother said he would be here," said Mary, looking away rather uneasily.

"I owe the Rider a good turn for that, my darling," said Dick, in his deep clear voice; and he tried to take her hand. Mary was human enough to be petulant.

"Hush, Dick, pray don't shout so!" said she, drawing her hand away.

Dick looked a little rebuffed, but he was in too high spirits to be quite crushed, and he was not subtle enough to have discovered that Mary was at her tenderest when he was quite crushed.

"Very well, Mary, I won't shout, and I'll keep my hands to myself if you like," said he, thrusting them into his pockets.

Dick looked very handsome as he stood beside her in his scarlet coat and hunting-cap. Mary glanced at him tyrannically—and softened.

"That's right, Mary," said the scapegrace, with his hands out of his pockets in a moment, and coming nearer again; "I've got such a lot to tell you, and I wanted a smile to help me out with it!"

"Well, what is it? You must make haste, or papa will be back."

Dick plunged into an account of the scene of the evening before. Mary was interested.

"Dorbridge! Eight hundred a year! Oh, how nice! It's such a pretty place, Dick, with a lovely vicarage in such beautiful grounds!"

"Why, Mary, you don't think I'm going to turn parson, do you?" asked Dick, in amazement.

"You don't mean to say you are going to thwart your father again, and throw away such an opportunity of——"

"Thwart my father! Why, do you want to see me married to that hard-riding Lady Ethel, and snuffling psalms as her father-confessor? That's what my father wants me to do. No, don't be angry, Mary, but you know I could never

make a clergyman—I'm not half good enough. I'm awfully vexed about it though, Mary, since you like Dorbridge so much. It's just like my luck; if I'd only been cut out for a curate, been a sober-looking sort of chap, I might have taken to the pulpit, married you off-hand, and seen Lady Ethel at the deuce. Well, I must work for you, that's all, Mary, if you'll only wait for such a good-for-nothing fellow, my darling!"

And Dick looked up so tenderly, so entreatingly, that Mary's face softened again. Carried away by his gratitude and his love, Dick seized the forbidden hand and, leaning over the little carriage, pressed it with passionate kisses. As he did so a rider cantered by on the soft turf of the lawn. It was Rutherford. He saw them and rode on, looking as black as thunder. Hapless Dick, bending over his darling's hand, had neither seen nor heard him—but Mary had! The wavering, tender look on her face changed, and she drew her half-willing hand sharply away, angry with herself for her momentary weakness; her low words were chilling.

"How dare you, Dick? You are in no fit state to come and talk to me!"

Dick started up in amazement.

"In no fit state to talk to you! Do you mean that I'm—that I've been drinking, Mary?"

But neither his handsome face nor his indignant words could soften her now; she looked at him calmly and coldly.

"I mean that you had better go back to your grooms and your horses," said she, in a voice just as soft as ever, but as effective in displeasure as it had been in kindness. There was no mistaking her; Dick, stricken, scarcely believing, looked steadfastly in her face for a moment, and knew she meant it; then a look, more wistful than indignant, came into his face; he still had one hand on the side of the carriage; Mary thought he was going to make another appeal, and began composedly to gather up the reins. Then Dick started. Stepping back, he raised his cap and bowed gravely to her, looking into her eyes with a steadiness equal to her own. Dick had the best of it that time; her hands faltered, and her bow was hardly as dignified as it ought to have been. But Dick was too generous, or perhaps hardly composed enough, to notice this; he turned and walked straight back to the house.

I saw that my former enchantress quickly recovered her serenity, and then I had not the patience to look at her again. After staring idly at the gathering groups on the lawn for a few minutes, I indulged my now impatient horse, and cantered off to the yard.

Rutherford was there, rowing a couple of grooms about something, and also Cuthbert, mounting his horse. Then I heard Dick's voice behind me, in the roughest of tones.

"Where on earth is Cheverley Run? He ought to have been round half-an-hour ago!"

Then the apologetic voice of the groom.

"Very sorry, sir; but squire said Mr. Marston was to have Cheverley Run, as his horse wasn't here in time; and as you could have Blackthorn or the chestnut mare."

"What! Lent Cheverley Run to that heavy brute Marston? I'm——" Here Dick thought proper to check himself.

"Blackthorn's in very good form, sir!"

"Hang Blackthorn—rushes at every fence!"

Dick walked a few steps away, in the blackest of tempers; then turned sharply round again:

"How's the mare?"

The groom hesitated.

"Well, sir, you see she ain't exactly fit for huntin' yet. On Thursday she threw two of us, and she ain't been out since."

Dick considered a moment; as he stood thus, Rutherford, who had been quietly attentive to all that passed, rode by him.

"Too spirited for you, eh, Parson Dick? Sorry we haven't got a nice, quiet cob!" and he rode out of the yard.

Dick was no sage, and the taunt was enough for him. He told the groom, with an oath, to look sharp out with the mare; then, when they led out a handsome, powerful-looking, vicious-eyed animal, pulling so that they could scarcely hold her, Dick jumped on her back, and forced her, rearing and kicking, out of the yard.

I did not quite like to see Dick, in his dare-devil mood, on a brute of so questionable a character; I turned to the groom who had held the dialogue with him:

"Not a very safe animal, that, for hunting, I should think! Are you not afraid of his coming to grief?"

"Not he, sir," replied the groom, confidently. "I don't know the animal as Master Dick couldn't sit. All he asks is that they should go, and that the mare can do. She's awk'ard to ride, as I know myself, for she's sent me flyin' over a brick

wall into a bed of nettles; but Master Dick 'll bring her to her senses, I'll warrant!"

Reassured, I rode out of the yard, on being told that the squire was now on the lawn, and that there was at last some prospect of a start.

There was a good field that day, though not nearly so large as it would have been if the squire's uncompromising character, and equally uncompromising fences, had not kept it always pretty well weeded. There was hardly a gate that would open on the estate, and woe to the unlucky wight who brought his one hack out for a run with the Combe pack, trusting to gaps! Every hedge bristled stiffly at such a one in thickset animosity. But to-day, fortified by Combe good cheer, there was yet, besides the sturdy few who "meant going," a goodly crop of heroes, who would wisely drop off after the first field or two, if they were not got rid of by still more summary means at the first fence.

There, in the midst of them, stood the squire, running a knowing eye over Lady Betty before mounting, and exchanging a remark or two with his second in command. There was a stir among the groups of horsemen, and the amateurs were more subdued; Squire Combe was a model M.F.H., and a glance of his eye struck terror into the hearts of the most intrepid duffers.

Rutherford was standing, his bridle on his arm, by Mary Combe, looking at first rather sulky, but evidently allowing himself to be brought round. Not far off was Lady Ethel Dereham, mounted on a spirited bay, which she managed with perfect ease, while sustaining a lively flirtation with the good-natured Percy, who contrived to insinuate that Dick's neglect to pay his respects to her arose from jealousy of Percy himself.

I looked round for Dick, and saw him cantering up from a distant part of the lawn on the now docile mare. The groom was right. He had brought her to her senses, and the exertion had done something towards clearing his brow. I hoped with all my heart that he would not look at his unkind darling, who had now quite brought the Rider round, and was chatting with him most amicably.

But I knew that he would—and he did. Rutherford saw him: turning to Mary, he spoke a few more words to her and then held out his hand. She gave him hers; he bent his head and lightly kissed it, and she let him! The shrubs and tree-trunks screened them sufficiently from general observation as they were some distance off; but Dick and I, with our attention riveted in that direction, could see all plainly enough. Dick turned quite white. Involuntarily he must have pricked the mare with the spur, for she began rearing and plunging; and, when he had again reduced her to order, the squire was at my side, the hounds had thrown off, and we were cantering down to cover.

I looked at Dick's face again, and saw the old Combe look there, fierce and sullen, while the restraint he put on the mare's pace was evidently more irksome to him than to her.

It was not long before we found. I heard the welcome "tally-ho," while pottering about in company with Rutherford, Dick, and one or two more, a little apart from the rest of the field, on that side of the copse where an old hand had conjectured that the fox would break covert. We were wrong; the shout came from the other side of the copse, and the fox was well away before we came in sight of him. There was the pack, some distance ahead, and two or three fields to the right. Some of us swore I fancy, and we all did our best to make up for the lost start. Immediately to the right of us were a couple of ploughed fields, and then, between us and the pack, the jump Cuthbert had told me about; the bank and double hedge on this side and the brook on the other. Rutherford was not on Lady Betty to-day, and none of the rest of us would have attempted it, but Dick at once struck off in that direction.

Knowing the reputation of this jump, not all my excitement could prevent my watching him with anxiety; in his reckless mood, he must have started off, forgetful of what lay before him. I glanced at Rutherford, and was startled to see that he also was watching his brother anxiously.

Forgetting the chase, we kept our eyes fixed upon dare-devil Dick, as, letting the mare go, he tore across the fields. He was making for the fatal fence; not looking to right or left for an easy place, but riding straight at it with a steadiness that made my heart leap.

"The fool!" shouted Rutherford, "she can't do it!"

Dick rode on, unhearing or unheeding. As he neared it he spurred the mare; she rose to the leap, touched the top of the hedge, wavered, struggled, and fell back, half crushing her rider under her.

Rutherford, beside me, said not a word, and we galloped up in dead silence, and swung off our horses near the struggling mare and her moaning rider. He had tried to extricate himself in falling, and had half succeeded at the expense of one leg fearfully mangled, and what other injuries we knew not. A dozen yokels who had been watching the hunt now came up, and surrounded us in gaping horror, followed by the riders who had been with us. Poor Dick writhed with agony as, under his brother's abrupt commands, we removed the terrible weight which was crushing him, and then he fainted away.

By Rutherford's orders a hurdle was quickly brought from an adjoining field; we lifted him on to it, and bore him slowly to the nearest cottage. Two or three of the rustics were sent off for the doctor; half-a-dozen more had followed us into the cottage before one of our party thought of shutting the gate. A trembling woman, awed into quiet by Rutherford's stern manner, whispered as we entered that there was a bed in the next room; we took him in there, and, as he was still unconscious, we gently placed him on it.

The pain of this brought him back to consciousness. The ghastly face drew into lines of pain as he opened his eyes.

"Those people! What do they all want?" said he, irritably, as he saw the curious, gaping group who had crept in after us.

Rutherford only looked round savagely, and, like frightened sheep, they huddled back into the next room, and were ejected by the woman of the house, including all of our own party but one, who, not liking to desert his comrade even though he could do no good, bribed the woman to let him wait in the outer room.

I only stayed with Rutherford by the bedside.

Dick tried to move, and groaned.

"You had better keep still," said Rutherford, harshly.

His brother lay quietly for a minute, and then asked feebly, "How did it happen?"

"You tried to take the brook fence—might have known the mare couldn't do it," replied the Rider. "Here, you had better have some brandy."

I handed him my flask, disgusted with his hardness. Was the great brute going to bully his brother on his death-bed?—for when I looked at Dick I could not hope. Supported by his brother's arm, which was as firm and as steady as ever, Dick drank a little. Then, quite unmanned by the sight of the poor lad's quivering muscles and stern efforts to control his sufferings, I stole behind the bed to the window, to watch for the doctor. As I stood there I heard a strange sound. Turning, I saw Rutherford down on his knees by the bedside, his head bent, his great frame convulsed by violent sobs.

Dick, regardless of the pain, struggled to raise himself, trying hoarsely to stop him.

"I did it! I did it! 'Parson Dick!' Oh, God!" burst out Rutherford.

"You, Rutherford, no—no! Hush! It wasn't you! It wasn't that! Mary—I was a fool to be jealous—I must tell you now, Rider—she and I have been engaged ever so long!"

Rutherford looked up, and I saw his face change.

"Don't let her think it was that killed me, Rutherford! Poor little thing! Give her my love—my love—and—they're all in my desk—and this——"

He put one hand falteringly to his breast, and fell back exhausted. Rutherford sprang up and supported his head. He spoke hoarsely but steadily:

"Yes, I'll give them to her—and your message. Don't talk now. Take some more brandy."

Dick opened his eyes, dreamily; then they brightened once more.

"No more; I'm not in pain now. I won't talk—but—the squire—tell the squire—I've made up—my mind!"

He tried to smile, and then his head dropped. There was silence in the room for a minute, and then Rutherford spoke to him. But Dick was dead.

KING'S COMBE.

A STORY IN FOUR CHAPTERS. CHAPTER IV.

THE Combe pack had a splendid run that day. The fox was a good one, and gave them a long chase before he gave in down by Dereham Hollow; only the squire, his three sons, and a few veteran fox-hunters were in at the death. The breakfast had made it late before they started, and they resolved to be content with the day's work.

Cuthbert left the party in order to ride home with Lord Dereham and his daughter; his father and the rest turned their horses' heads towards King's Combe. The squire was in high good-humour; he rode on in front with an old friend, reviewing the events of the day with many a hearty laugh. Not far behind rode the rest, chatting, and patting their horses. Presently, a boy, who had been stealthily following the riders on the other side of the hedge, burst through, and shambled hesitatingly up to the side of the Dandy. Jim looked down in sullen amazement.

"What the deuce do you mean by this? Get out of the way, or——"

The rustic, restored to himself by the well-known style of this address, here broke in stolidly:

"Please, sir, Master Rutherford sent me. Master Dick is a lyin' yonder in Mother Cray's cottage, and—and—please, sir, you're to tell the squire."

The last words were quite successful in rousing Jim's faculties. "Percy," he called out; "Percy, come here, you're wanted."

Percy rode back, and the boy repeated his story. "And please, sir," said he again to Jim, "you're to tell the squire!"

Jim, much excited, seized him by the collar.

"No, you go and tell the squire, you——"

But the boy twisted himself out of his strong grasp, and darted through the hedge.

"It's all a lie, a confounded lie of that young rascal's," said Jim, white and trembling.

Percy looked disturbed, but he had his wits about him as usual.

"He wouldn't dare say such a thing; nor would he have the wit to invent it! It's true enough, beyond a doubt. You will have to break it to the squire, Jim, while I get home and prepare Margaret."

"I tell the squire! I won't! I'll be hanged if I will!" said Jim, forcibly.

"Then I must, I suppose, you hulking coward," said Percy, quietly.

He left his brother, and rode quickly up to the squire, waiting until he should have finished a speech he was making to one of his friends.

"As good a run as we shall have this season! Can't understand Rutherford's not being in at the finish, nor Dick! Dick got that mare in order in style to-day, and looked as if he meant going."

Then the squire noticed Percy, riding quietly by his side. He saw by his son's face that he had something to tell.

"Eh, Percy? What's the matter?"

"Dick's done for, sir," said Percy. The Combes always spoke to the point when they had anything to say; it was part of their training. The squire drew rein.

"Where is he?"

"Cray's cottage, sir. Rutherford's with him."

"Gentlemen, you will excuse me!" said the squire, turning to his awestruck companions. And he rode away with his son, as composed and cool as ever.

I had left Rutherford alone by the bedside, and joined the woman of the house and young Hedley in the outer room, when the squire entered.

"Which way?" he asked the woman. She pointed to the half-open door, and he entered, so calmly that we thought he could not know what he should find there. But the squire was true to his own creed. We waited, awed—silent. Then we heard him speak to Rutherford, and the sullen tones of the latter's reply; he was giving his father Dick's message. There was a pause, and then the squire came gravely out. "Call the men," he said; "we must take him home."

He had seen, as he entered, the groups of amazed rustics hanging about at a respectful distance. I opened the door and beckoned to a couple of labourers who were slinking behind a couple of bare trees. They tramped silently in, followed by the village doctor, who had been absent from home when sent for. He began apologising, trusted that he——

"You're too late, Mr. Lawson," said the squire. "He's dead; and if you want to know what killed him, you must wait till we get to the house."

The doctor bowed, and stepped meekly into the background. Rutherford and his father placed poor Dick's body again on the hurdle, and covered him; then Rutherford, and young Hedley, and the two labourers carried him out—carried him home. The squire led the way, erect, grave, and calm; the doctor and I brought up the rear.

I went direct to my own room; but I was scarcely there before I heard the heavy tramp up the stairs, the pause at my door, then the tramp up—up again; the opening of the door I knew so well; then a slower tread over my head than I was accustomed to hear—they were in Dick's room; there was a pause, and a sound as of the laying down of a burden, and then I heard the tramp—tramp down again. Dick was in his room; but the lad was quiet enough now.

The heavy stillness was unbearable; I left my room and went downstairs into the empty study.

Not a sound in all the house; but a murmur of coarse voices from the stable-yard; it suddenly ceased; someone had gone in among them.

Presently the door of the room opened, and Jim lounged in, restless and sulky. Jim did not show to advantage in affliction.

"What has everybody skulked out of the way for? Not a soul in the place, it seems! Fire half out! I'll wake somebody!"

He crossed the room towards the bell, when a shout was heard in the hall which arrested even him.

"Dick, Dick! Where are you, Dick?"

It was Cuthbert, just returned from Dereham Hall. He opened the door and burst in, bright from his ride.

"Hallo! Where's Dick? I want him to come for a gallop. I've got Bramble waiting outside. Where is he, Jim?"

Jim replied, with an oath, "Ask Rutherford."

"Rutherford! Rutherford's no friend of Dick's! He did him an ill turn this morning with his 'Parson Dick.' Where is the Rider?"

"How should I know?"

"You are precious surly, sir, this afternoon; and the colonel is as glum! Can't make you all out! I suppose I shall find someone upstairs. Perhaps Dick is in his room!"

Dick was in his room. Cuthbert dashed out of the study, and we heard him mount the stairs two at a time; heard the click of the lock as he flung open the door, and then, horror-struck, we felt the shock, and a moment after, the wild cry that we were waiting for rang through the house. At that minute the glass door which led from the stable-yard opened, and Rutherford walked in. He heard the cry and stood, as we did, listening.

Down came the footsteps, dashing down the stairs and across the hall; the half-open door was flung wide, and

Cuthbert came in. His excited face became convulsed with passion when he saw Rutherford.

"You've killed him!" he shouted; and, springing across the room, he raised the hunting-whip he still carried, and struck his brother across the face.

Rutherford never blenched. Without a word he caught the boy's arms, took from him the whip, and threw it away; then he let him go, saying gravely:

"Go; and don't strike so blindly next time."

Cuthbert looked up, astonished, and saw in his brother's stern face a grief greater than his own. Subdued and ashamed, he turned and left the room, with head bent down. I followed him out.

That evening I saw more of the iron Combe discipline. When I entered the drawing-room, shortly before the usual dinner-hour, they were all assembled—all but that one! Margaret was white as marble, but as unmoved as the rest. Never was the Combe training so manifest; when I looked from the one to the other, each was decorously grave, each resolutely cold. Percy had avoided any difficulty as to conversation by reading a leader on the Reorganisation of the Army; he had not been as successful as usual in choosing his subject, for just then the army meant to us one young soldier—lying quietly upstairs.

Percy read his leader steadily to the end; everyone listened with grave attention, but the announcement of dinner was a great relief to us all.

The training of the rest of the household was not quite so complete; for when we took our seats, between James and me there was an empty chair, an empty place. Then Cuthbert almost broke down; he was exactly opposite, between Rutherford and Percy; the blood rushed into his face; he breathed hard, and half rose; but Percy quietly detained him, while a frightened servant drew away the unneeded chair. Then James and I closed up, and the dinner began.

There had been a minute's silence, but the squire, without a visible effort, resumed the conversation, and in spite of the first shock, everyone joined in it; not once after that was there a pause. Nothing disturbed the even flow of talk until dinner was half over; then suddenly, while the squire was speaking, a loud, long laugh from Rutherford rang through the room. Startled, we all looked towards him. His eyes were bright and restless, and his face was flushed. Suddenly conscious of the effect he had produced, he stared round the table; then his head sank, and a shiver passed through his frame. Rising abruptly, he pushed back his chair and left the room.

This scene almost unnerved Margaret. She rose, hesitated, then resolutely sat down again. Once more the iron will of the old squire prevailed, and the talk went on. But a sickened feeling crept over me; I could scarcely keep my thoughts from straying. At last dessert came, and brave Margaret was free. We soon broke up, but the squire kept his resolute composure to the last.

That night, by the squire's orders, the door of Rutherford's room was watched; they dared not remove the key nor tamper with the lock.

In the night someone crept heavily up the stairs and into the room above, where the staid, reticent housekeeper sat up. I heard a man's sobbing, and it was long before the footsteps came down again. I don't know who it was; all I am sure of is that it was not Jim.

By the squire's desire, I stayed for the funeral. The stern effort at stolidity grew easier after that gloomy first night, and Rutherford ruled back his wavering reason with an iron will, and was as calm as the rest.

The day came when Dick was to be buried. We carried him ourselves to the little church, between lines of mourners; several of his brother-officers were there, and half the foxhunters of the county. As he stood beside the open grave, Rutherford's struggle grew hard; the strong frame by my side quivered, and I put my old arm within his. He did not notice this until it was all over, when he started, turned, and hoarsely thanked me. I walked home with him silently, and we knew that we were friends.

The squire asked me to stay yet a little while among them, and for the sake of Rutherford, in whom my interest was now very strong, I did so.

A few days afterwards, the latter spoke to me after breakfast:

"I am going down to the Parsonage to-day, to give—her—his message."

It was the first reference he had made to his dead brother or his false love. I walked down towards the church to meet him on his return; when he appeared he

looked even sterner than usual, but less constrained. We turned towards King's Combe together.

"I think you know something about the way this girl befooled us," he said abruptly.

I nodded.

"She was quite up to her usual form today. Ignorant how much I knew, she began condoling with me, sympathising with me; and I let her. She was most touchingly sorry for me; she felt for my grief, for my loss. She did it very well; all in that gentle voice that made a fool of me once. At last I said: 'You are very kind, Miss Irwin; my brother did not forget you when he lay dying.' I think she looked a little surprised; but I swear the tears were in her eyes as she answered. 'Thought of me! Poor fellow!' 'Yes, Miss Irwin,' said I, looking at her steadily; 'Dick sent you his love.' The colour came into her face then. 'And he told me to give you back these;' and I handed her the letters, and a book of poetry, and then a little sheet of paper—I think there was hair inside—with 'From my darling' scrawled outside. 'I took that from his jacket when he was dead, Miss Irwin.' She took them without a word. 'And I have brought you back this;' and I gave her another packet, with a curl she had given me inside; I had been fool enough to write something of the same sort on it once. Her colour got deeper, but I declare she did not lose her self-possession even then; she kept her eyes down. 'Thank you,' she said. I felt that I should have liked to say something bitter, but it's of no use to try to fight these women with their own weapons; and I knew she was hard hit, though she was so cool. So I bowed and came away."

He paused, and then suddenly broke out in a wild burst of passion:

"Curse her! Curse her dark eyes and her soft voice! She maddened us both; woke the devil in me, and broke Dick's heart; and now she has killed him!"

It was some time before I again heard anything of the Combes. The next news I received from Lubishire was an invitation to the wedding of Percy Combe and—Mary Irwin.

I did not go; my admiration for Clever Combe's talents was too great for me to suppose him utterly ignorant of the part she had played in the story of his brothers' lives; and I was not sure that I could look sufficiently festive for the occasion. However, I met him, not long afterwards, looking as quietly intelligent as ever, and heard, from him, of several changes at King's Combe.

Cuthbert had grown restless and irritable, and wanted to go to London to join Rutherford, to whom he had transferred his boyish homage. So the squire sent him to Oxford, with a warning impressive enough to keep him steady. Jim the squire kept with him—to look after some of the farms, he said. Percy thought this fact significant.

"The squire is not the kind of man to show his wounds," said he. "But, you see, he has always been remarkably independent of his boys or any other society. Don't think I mean that he's breaking up. Not a trace of decay in him. By-the-bye, do you know that he hunted through the winter, and twice took the brook that did for poor Dick? But there's something wrong when the squire can find company in Jim!"

However that might be, before the next hunting season came round, the squire was dead.

I visit Rutherford at King's Combe now and then. He is not sullen now, but he is very stern. He looks much older than he is, but the opinion of the Lubishire wiseacres is that he is "as hard as nails," and I believe they are right.

There is no King's Combe pack now, and the present squire has never hunted since that fatal run of Dereham Hollow; but he keeps a capital stud, and rides and drives as well as ever. People said at one time that he was going to marry Lady Ethel Dereham, he was at Dereham Park so often. But I believe that he never thought of such a thing, and only haunted the place because she had cared for his brother. Rutherford Combe was no longer a marrying man.

So Jim has a very good prospect of sulking in savage state at King's Combe in the time to come, if, indeed, his brother, who threatens to wear well, does not outlive him.

Cuthbert is in the army. He is a nice young fellow, but rather extravagant; his brother should cut down his allowance by one half; but Cuthbert was Dick's chum, and Rutherford will never tighten the reins over him, I am afraid.

Percy has made his way, as everybody knew that he would. He is Sir Percy

Combe, Baronet, already, but of course he will not stop there. He and his fascinating wife do not visit much at King's Combe. Lady Combe says gravely: "Rutherford Combe talks so unfeelingly of his poor brother's death!"